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ABSTRACT

Dramatic activities, tasks that unite language learning with bodily movements, voice intonation, emotion, and imagination, may be eased into the traditional classroom structure to enrich and enhance the intellectual aspects of language learning and to motivate students. These activities can be modified to meet the needs and difficulty levels of any class. In one activity, students choose an adjective written on a slip of paper from a hat and act it out for the class using facial expressions, gestures, and sounds. A verb exercise uses twenty-questions or charade techniques. In a noun exercise, students could describe or write a dialog about a person owning the object in a question, or the object could be used to discuss cultural differences. A street corner scene stressing character development can be used for a skit, and impromptu monologs on topics drawn from a hat can be produced. Simple exercises such as these can be brief, imaginative, interesting, and distracting from classroom routines. (MSE)

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THEATRE AS A TOOL IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: LET'S PLAY, MOTIVATE AND LEARN!

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So, you're straight out of college and full of ideas! Theories of language learning buzz excitedly from one side of your brain to the other! Those goals for your first foreign language class are lofty and practically perfect: "The student shall become proficient in speaking, writing, reading and listening comprehension of the target language." "The student shall become an expert in the art of cultural awareness and help the language teachers of the world change the course of humanity." "My classroom shall overflow with such linguistic perfection that my chest will expand with pride and my very existence will be justified fourfold!"

Then, forsooth, one day, as you stroll professionally through the halls of your academic environment, you inadvertently tune in on some meaningless palaver. At least, in regards to your classroom, these comments are nonsensical gibberish: "I hate that dumb class. All we do is repeat, repeat, repeat!" "It's so dull in there! Every day it's the same old, stupid thing!" "That's not a class--it's a torture chamber!"

So, you pride yourself on your highly disciplined approach to language teaching. So, you proceed methodically through the textbook, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, page by page, chapter by chapter. So, you drill your charges on verbs until they respond without thinking, as all well-programmed robots should.

Maybe you could be the topic sentence in a scholarly exercise in negativity. Reality has finally forced itself upon you. Take another look at your goals for your foreign language classroom. Everything seems to be in order there, and you certainly cannot change even one little comma in your objectives. Perhaps you need to focus for a moment on your students. Do they want to keep up with the blueprint that you have so carefully prepared to insure their success in the target language arena?

Congratulations! You have just smashed into the basic problem that torments many foreign language teachers at some point in their career. Suddenly your professional emphasis changes from academic proficiency to attitude problems. Is it possible to transmit your enthusiasm to others? How do you convince students that your dreams and goals need to be theirs? Now you know that the most successful teachers are ninety-nine per cent motivator and one per cent instructor.

The next thing you discover is that a certain incentive or stimulus to action may work for one colleague in his or her classroom: however, you cannot be assured that this technique will be

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equally effective in your schoolroom. Theories that sound so good on paper may not get results with your pupils. Nonetheless, do not lose heart. Do not give up.

Think for a moment about the learning process as you have experienced it. Trace it through your life and see how its role became modified and changed as you grew older. As a pre-schooler, you were allowed to learn through playtime activities. In kindergarten, gaining knowledge was still fun. However, the older you became, the more the act of acquiring knowledge became serious business, an arduous task, a frustrating chore. Did you ever become frightened about the possibility of not being able to live up to your teachers' demands? Can you now relate to what may be happening to the youngsters in your classroom? If you are brave enough, walk into your schoolroom tomorrow and address your pupils: "We are going to use this class time to respond to a survey regarding your expectations and foreign languages. Please write answers to the following questions:

1. Why are you studying (Spanish, French, Russian...)?
2. What did you expect a foreign language class to be like?
3. Have you been disappointed in any way about how the class is run, the kinds of activities you have encountered, your progress, etc.?
4. How do you feel while in this class: frightened, nervous, dumb, secure, enthusiastic, bored, angry, etc.?
5. If you could change anything about this class, what would it be? How would you change the areas that you consider to be problems?

Tomorrow we will discuss these areas in hopes of making this class a more effective learning experience."

Later that evening, as you sort through their essays, keep track of the number of times that students mention their negative reactions to being in a foreign language classroom. Do they ever mention the word "fun?" If they do, it is probably because that is the missing element. Review one last time all those theories you studied and memorized in your many education classes. Can entertainment and learning co-exist in the foreign language classroom?

Yes! There is a way to momentarily distract students without destroying the learning process. Have you ever considered using theatre as a tool in second language learning? I can already feel you easing nervously towards the door. I can hear your thoughts: "She's crazy! I've never acted in a play! I don't know the first thing about lighting, make up, or costumes! Why is she trying to complicate my already impossible life?"

There is no need to panic. Let me explain. There are two views concerning the use of theatre in the classroom. One method

is to actually perform a play in the target language. However, it is also possible to incorporate theatre into your language teaching objectives by means of "dramatic activities."

In order to present a play, one has a well-defined end product in mind. The principal goal is to have individuals memorize lines and move about a stage in some meaningful way. By using dramatic activities, on the other hand, the teacher is focusing on the process of dramatization. These activities could relate to performing a play, but do not need to. Dramatic activities are those tasks that unite language learning with bodily movements, voice intonation, emotion and imagination. With a little creativity on the teacher's part, simple theatrical exercises may be eased into the traditional classroom structure in order to enrich and enhance the intellectual aspects of language learning. Such activities can also be modified to meet the needs and levels in any class, and the possibilities are endless.

Last week your beginning students were learning adjectives in the target language. You can easily work this into a dramatic activity and use it as a quick ten-minute warm-up exercise.

1. Write various adjectives in the target language on separate slips of paper and place them in a hat, a basket or some other receptacle. Call for a volunteer to draw the first slip. (By the way, the very act of picking their own adjective allows students to relax slightly and gives the feel of a more democratic ambiance rather than a teacher-controlled situation!) Some suggestions for adjectives are: happy, sad, angry, afraid, worried, bored, impatient, confused, depressed, tired.

2. Academically, the pupil must be able to read and understand what the word means. Dramatically, the teacher may suggest a variety of activities.

   a. Standing in front of the class, the student may use appropriate facial gestures in order to project his/her adjective or emotion to the other students. The class, in the target language, must guess which emotion is being pantomimed. The person who correctly guesses the adjective may draw the next adjective and repeat the process.

   b. This activity may also be extended to include body language. Instead of focusing only upon the face, the teacher may ask the class members to walk across the room with the adjective in mind. The emotion is thereby projected through posture and movement.

   c. Voice intonation may likewise be incorporated into this exercise. Instead of facial gestures or body language, have the students project the emotion through sound. Beginning students may count to ten, using the intonation

which would be appropriate for the emotion in question. More advanced pupils may recite the alphabet or read simple phrases in the target language, varying the intonation according to the adjective.

d. In more advanced classes, the teacher may follow the correct answer with a series of questions utilizing vocabulary and grammar from past lessons: Why is Robert sad? Where is Robert? What is he doing? When will Robert feel better? In the more advanced classes, students may be called upon to ask the questions.

Verbs lend themselves with considerable ease to dramatic activities. Have a volunteer draw a slip of paper that contains a phrase in the target language. The pupil acts out a response to the teacher's question that stresses the verb being studied: What is he/she reading, eating, opening...? This type of exercise also works very well with command forms for the more advanced students.

1. Samples to act out:

   a. To read: You are reading...
      a recipe for the first time
      a boring textbook
      a letter from your girlfriend/boyfriend
      a favorite cartoon

   b. To eat: You are eating...
      a triple cheese pizza with your hands
      barbecued spare ribs
      spaghetti
      an ice cream cone
      a jalapeño pepper

   c. To open: You are opening...
      a box of roses from an unknown admirer
      a bottle of champagne without a bottle opener
      a jar of honey whose lid sticks and then comes off suddenly
      an umbrella in the wind, only to discover that it has holes in it.

2. This dramatic activity may also be varied or expanded through the use of questions asked by either the teacher or students: Who is he/she? Where is he/she? Why is he/she reading...? When is he/she reading...? How many people are with him/her?

Nouns may be used as an aid in the process of memorization. The teacher may put together a collection of articles from recent lessons. You may wish to select things that could belong to one person, such as, for example, a knapsack, jogging shorts, a textbook, tablet, vitamins, a comb...

1. For the beginning students it may be enough to recite or write the names of the articles they have seen.

2. More advanced students may be asked to write a character study of the person they feel owns the articles.

3. Students may be asked to work in pairs in order to write a short dialog about the person who owns the articles and his/her friend. Have each pair act out their skit.

4. This exercise may be used to project cultural differences. Place food, clothing, or personal articles from the target culture on a desk and have the class form groups of two or three and work out a cultural dialog. Give them an evening to rehearse at home before presenting the skit for the class.

Both beginning and advanced language students can respond to a simple street corner scene stressing character development. Allow the students to choose a partner. Each person will then decide to play the part of a character (unbeknownst to anyone else) from the target culture: a lawyer, a servant, a child, an elegant lady, a priest, a nun, an Indian merchant...

1. The teacher may give the pair a simple dialog to memorize:

   Hello.
   Hello.
   How are you today?
   Fine, and you?
   Fine. The weather is beautiful, isn't it?
   Yes.
   Good-bye.
   Good-bye.

   The class will observe the manner in which the two people interact and attempt to guess who the characters are.

2. This exercise may be expanded by having the students create questions in the target language for the two characters: Who are you? Where are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Where do you live? Where do you work? How long will you be here? What time is it?

Impromptu monologs can be fun and educational for language students at any level. Have the students write a topic for conversation in the target language on a slip of paper. Collect the papers in a hat or other convenient receptacle.

1. Sample topics:
   My favorite vacation.
   My most boring class.

Everything I know about backpacking.
My pets.
The kind of job I would like to have.

2. Ask for a volunteer to be the first "victim": The student will draw a slip of paper from the hat and read the topic aloud. He/she must say two or three sentences in the target language about the topic. If the student gets stuck, allow the class to help out. When the student finishes, allow him/ her to choose the next victim.

3. As a variation, the teacher may want to give points for correct grammar usage.

Hopefully, these few dramatic exercises will give you some ideas for temporarily distracting and motivating your students without totally separating them from the language learning process. Although some of these activities may seem absurdly simple to you, you will find that they create enthusiasm among the pupils. In most cases, it is impossible to predict the outcome of these tasks; that is, the students will never know what to expect from their classmates who are standing in front of the class. Since most of these exercises force the class to focus on creativity and imagination, any existing boredom will be reduced. You will also find that while you, the teacher, get a break for a few moments, the students are active at all times. They are either reading, observing, interpreting, or acting. Besides these obvious activities, everone uses imagination regardless of the exercise!

By this time, there must be at least two major questions on your mind. First, who has time for these kinds of activities? Remember, these dramatic activities need not dominate the entire class period. Use them as a warm-up or as a quick review of yesterday's lesson. Two or three pantomimes will get the class moving, change the atmosphere and cause the students to believe that they are playing, rather than studying!

Second, how do you handle the student who feels that he or she cannot act? Remind the class that their grades are not based on acting talent, but rather on involvement in the activity. Allow the more reticent pupils to observe, interpret and respond from their seats for a few days. They are still participating and their involvement will become more pronounced as soon as they see that the others are not perfect actors or actresses either!

What matters is that, by momentarily distracting your students, a new sense of enthusiasm and motivation is born. The class is now more willing to reach for your goals, thus, reestablishing your professional sense of self. You are not a failure. You are a good teacher and a motivational genius! Congratulations!